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## Adolescent dating abuse

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## Adolescent dating abuse

### Abstract

Abuse can take on many forms. Many adolescents have not developed a full understanding of what a healthy relationship is. Dating abuse is becoming problematic within the adolescent population and a growing concern for those in the field of school counseling. School counselors need to be able to recognize signs of both potential abusers and their victims, and provide prevention and intervention strategies involved with adolescent dating abuse. Through education and involvement of the school and community, counselors will be effective in helping to diminish the cycle of dating abuse among adolescents.

# ADOLESCENT DATING ABUSE

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Becky Krieg

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### Abstract

Abuse can take on many forms. Many adolescents have not developed a full understanding of what a healthy relationship is. Dating abuse is becoming problematic within the adolescent population and a growing concern for those in the field of school counseling. School counselors need to be able to recognize signs of both potential abusers and their victims, and provide prevention and intervention strategies involved with adolescent dating abuse. Through education and involvement of the school and community, counselors will be effective in helping to diminish the cycle of dating abuse among adolescents.

### Adolescent Dating Violence

Teenage dating violence is a relatively new issue. Prior to World War I, adults supervised the interactions of young adults, in today's society this type of supervision is pretty obsolete. Today's society with its busy schedules, and both the mother and father of most families having full-time jobs, leaves many teenagers unsupervised. In addition, teenagers are saturated with images of sex and violence through the media. Teenagers do not always have the ability to process this information and see that it should not reflect their life experiences. Educators and counselors are reporting an increase in teen dating violence (Suarez, 1999). Adolescent dating violence is not just a family concern or school concern, it is a community wide issue that can affect any socioeconomic or ethnic group, and needs to be addressed.

Adolescence by definition is a period of rapid growth both physically and emotionally, which often leads to feelings of insecurity and doubt. During this stage of development, teenagers start to seek independence and peers play an important role in their lives. Being a teenager in today's society means facing many pressures including their appearance, grades, their social network, and being involved in dating relationships. Unfortunately a study run by Nifong, reported that "one in five teenagers report being a victim of physical or sexual violence in a dating relationship, which included being hit, slapped, shoved or forced into sexual activity by dates" (2001, p. 6). The National Domestic

Violence Office stated, “thirty percent of all murdered teenage girls are killed by a current or former boyfriend” (as cited in Tonn, 2005, p.3). According to these statistics and ones similar to it, teenage dating violence has or will touch the lives of everyone in some way. There are many reasons that adolescence dating violence must be addressed.

An analysis of panel data from the Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health indicates that violence in intimate adolescent relationships results in depressed feelings, running away from home, serious thoughts about suicide, dropping out of school, and teenage pregnancy (as cited in Hagan & Foster, 2001, p.874).

Exposure to violence forces adolescents to face adult issues prematurely and not complete the adolescent phase of development. Not only does dating violence during the teenage years have immediate negative repercussions; there may also be many negative long-term issues. Hagan and Foster (2001) reported that some of these issues may include post-traumatic stress, young adults who do not have enough education to secure a job to support themselves, increased use of alcohol and drugs, children trying to raise children, as well as a continuation of abuse through the generations.

The purpose of this paper is to outline the different forms of abuse, identify factors that play a role in dating violence, and provide information on different intervention and prevention techniques that can be used at home, in

schools, and throughout the community. Information will also be provided as to why there is a need for teenagers to be included in Domestic Abuse Laws.

### Definition

The University of Michigan Sexual Assault Prevention and Awareness Center in Ann Arbor defines violence as the “intentional use of abusive tactics and physical force in order to obtain and maintain power and control over an intimate partner” (as cited in Hagan & Foster, 2004, p.874). Dating violence takes on many forms, including psychological and emotional abuse, physical abuse, and sexual abuse. It can occur during casual dating or in serious long-term relationships (Jezl, Molitor & Wright, 1996).

Psychological, also referred to as emotional abuse includes using words or actions to control, isolate, or humiliate. Threatening violence is also a form of psychological abuse. Many times psychological abuse diminishes the victims independence and self-esteem to the point that the victim feels that they have no other choice but to remain in the abusive relationship. One theory that seeks to explain why teenagers do not get out of psychologically abusive relationships is the Stockholm Theory. This theory states that the abused does not get out of the relationship because that is how the victim defines them self (Suarez, 1999). Although psychological abuse is not as easy to detect, it is just as harmful as the injuries received from physical abuse especially since the abuse is happening



during years where the teenager is easily influenced and in the process of sculpting their beliefs and defining who they are.

Physical abuse includes the use of any type of force that results in physical injury. Some common types of physical abuse that occur among teenage relationships include pushing or shoving, restraining or choking. Both teenage boys and girls report being victims of physical abuse, however, teenage boys usually use physical force for different reasons. As stated by O'Keefe, "Boys tend to act violently because they are angry and are more likely to use force to control their girlfriends, while girls more often act violently in self-defense" (1997, p.554). Many teenage girls who experience physical abuse in dating relationships fear for their safety in attempts to leave an abusive relationship (Gamache, as cited in Suarez, 1999). Because of this fear, the abused stays in the relationship and the abusive cycle continues.

Sexual abuse includes all forms of sexual harassment, sexual coercion or sexual assault. Sexual harassment includes unwanted or unwelcome sexual behavior, actions or words. Sexual coercion includes manipulating a person or situation unfairly in order to get sex, and sexual assault includes any form of sexual activity without a person's consent (Hagan & Foster, 2001, p.877). Jezl, Molitor, & Wright reported that, "teenage girls in heterosexual relationships are much more likely than teenage boys to suffer from sexual abuse" (1996, p.73).

Research has found that there are a number of factors that play a role in abuse during teenage dating. Some factors included by Jezl, Molidor & Wright are, “an individual’s past experience(s) of abuse, an individual’s belief system and attitudes, an individual’s knowledge about and skills to deal with relationships, drinking and drug use, the seriousness of the dating relationship itself, and peer influences and pornography” (1996, p.77).

Prior abuse or seeing abuse occur has been found to significantly increase the risk for a teenager to engage in an abusive relationship. If a child grows up in a family where they are exposed to their parents being abused or being an abuser the child is more likely to become involved in an abusive relationship (Hagan & Foster, 2001). In studies performed by O’Keeffe many adults who were in abusive relationships stated that their first experiences with abuse occurred in a violent dating relationship when they were teenagers (as cited by Suarez, 1994).

Some teenagers may believe that it is acceptable to force a person to have sex and the abused may see this as affection. Some teenagers are raised to believe that the man has the right to decide what the woman in the relationship can or cannot do and that women are inferior to males. Different cultures have different beliefs and practices regarding relationship practices between men and women. Intervention strategies must be geared towards each individual community. As Ruback and Weiner stated, “violent behaviors, in particular those that are not

lethal in outcome, are defined, legitimated and sanctioned in a variety of ways. How society and culture, especially traditional societal and cultural ideas and their associated values and effects condition violent behaviors” (1995, p.670). As stated by Thompson, Pleck, & Ferrera, “the social forces affecting men’s experiences will be different for men of different ages, cohorts, class, race, sexual preference, and religion” (1992, p.594).

Adolescence is a time of change both physically and emotionally and if a teenager has a lack of healthy relationship role models they may have not learned how to deal with ways to resolve conflict (Halpern, Oslak, Young, Martin & Kupper, 2001). Wekerle & Wolfe stated that “weak relationships with parents or harsh parenting practices have been associated with delinquent behavior more generally and dating violence specifically” (1999, p.440). Beyond the family the community that the adolescent grows up in may influence adolescent violence. If the adolescent sees that violence in a relationship is a norm or that there is not the prevention of this taking place they may model poor relationship behavior.

Silverman, Raj, Mucci & Hathaway stated, “among early adolescents, a strong association between reporting dating aggression and reporting substance abuse has been found” (2001, p.577).

Alcohol is involved in sixty percent of reported cases of child abuse, a majority of domestic-violence cases, forty-one percent of assaults, thirty-

nine percent of rapes, and sixty-four percent of criminal homicide (Murray, 2000, p.102).

Abusive behavior becomes greater when alcohol or drugs are involved. In a study run by Asencio both males and females described the use of alcohol and drugs as setups for sex, "if a female was under the influence of alcohol or drugs, she became an easy target for sexual conquest" (1999, p.115). The amount of substance abuse within today's teenage population at an all time high, this is an issue that needs to be addressed in order to fully deal with adolescent dating violence.

Studies performed by the Canadian National Survey have found that the more serious a teenager's dating relationship is the higher the chance abuse will occur. During adolescence, peers are one of the strongest influences in a teenagers life. If the abusive actions towards their partner are positively reinforced by the teenager's peers, then the teenager is more likely to continue the abusive behaviors. If the victim of abuse believes that his or her peers support the relationship he or she may continue to stay in an unhealthy relationship.

Dating during adolescence is usually sensationalized role-playing, where the male takes on the more dominate role and the female the more submissive role. Because these roles are generally assumed, the stage for abuse is set. Teenagers don't want to be "different" so they generally go along with these predetermined norms that society has set up for them. Teenagers are mostly

inexperienced in relationships and do not know how to handle all of the feelings that come with the different interactions. Therefore, they may not deal with them maturely. Swindle's study found that many times girls base their identity on dating and the success of the relationship, because of this many times they are willing to overlook abuse from their partner (as cited in Suarez, 1994).

The media tends to normalize violence in relationships and because of this teenagers may "develop inappropriate expectations or understandings of relationships and sexuality based on these external influences and may have difficulty distinguishing certain signs of abuse, such as jealousy, from love" (Becky & Farren, 1997, p.305). During the early stages of an abusive relationship, the victim believes this is normal relationship behavior. Once the abuse is taken to the next level and the teenager realizes it is abuse she may be too embarrassed to seek out help or believe that there is no one or no place for her to go to get help. As stated by Roan, "it is estimated that only one in twenty-five teenagers involved in an abusive relationship will seek help" (as cited in Suarez, 1994, p.450).

### *The signs*

Dating abuse can occur at any age, however, according to Murray, "dating violence appears to begin between the ages of fifteen and sixteen" (2000, p.57). Individuals who were abused as children or who have seen family members abused are more likely to perpetrate abuse. The adolescent has been raised to

believe that abusive behavior in a relationship is normal and a way to deal with anger and stress. Other indicators of potential abusers include individuals with low self-esteem or short tempers, individuals who get serious too soon in a relationship, are obsessive about their partner, individuals who need to know the whereabouts of the other person at all times, exhibit extreme jealousy, and one or both of their parents have abused drugs (Murray, 2000). It is also important that parents document their son or daughters childhood and whether there was a lot of acting out or temper tantrums that occurred (Suarez, 1999). These factors may show the individuals inability to deal with situations in a rationale manner and be early indicators of abusive behaviors that may escalate as the child grows up.

Possible behaviors of someone who is being abused may include having a low self-esteem, suffering from depression, having unexplained cuts or bruises, or appearing overly nervous. A victim of abuse may also start distancing themselves from people or activities they once enjoyed, have difficulty sleeping, or experience a drop in their grades (Department of Justice Canada, 2002).

### Prevention

Various surveys given by Becky & Farren (1997), found that teens are aware that they are at high risk of being involved in an abusive relationship and believe it is important that intervention programs are set up as part of their education before dating starts occurring. The public health community has taken over the main responsibility for reducing the incidence of teenage dating violence

seen by their predecessors, the criminal justice system. The public health approach represents a shift from responding to violent behavior exclusively with punishment to responding with preventive interventions (Asencio, 1999, p.117).

Many communities are becoming more aware that early intervention programs are necessary and early studies reported on by Suarez have found that “education is the most effective in changing abusive behavior when it emphasizes that violence is not a normal or necessary part of interpersonal relationships” (1999, p.454). Many schools have focused on providing this education through the use of groups in the school setting. These groups focus on anger control, assertiveness, and responsible education. The school setting is a good place for this type of an intervention to occur because it is seen as a more socially acceptable place for this type of service as opposed to a mental health facility or a shelter. Additionally, a large number of teenagers can be reached. Although not much has been published on the outcomes of these interventions in the United States, Canadian researchers Tontodonato & Crew reported, “positive changes in attitude, knowledge, and behavioral interactions in high school students who are exposed to information and discussion of dating violence” (1992, p. 57).

Teen dating violence has been related to school violence, therefore institutions like the New York State Office for the Prevention of Domestic Violence recommends that, “all schools develop a teen dating violence policy to address potential dangers, provide necessary training, and establish an advisory

team from the community” (as cited in Sudermann & Jaffe, 1993). Schools can also provide groups for students and have school safety policies in tact. A policy on teen dating violence can provide the victim safety and make the offender accountable, it can also establish clear roles for the school faculty, and address dating violence with community agencies so the general public can be informed about the issue at hand. Peacock & Rothman reported that “approximately forty-three percent of teen dating violence victims reported that the dating abuse they experienced occurred in a school building or on school grounds” (2001, p.2). School faculties need to be sensitized to adolescent dating violence and need to be informed about the legal actions that can be taken and the community services available.

### *Group prevention*

Large and small group sessions are an effective way to reach teenagers and educate them on the skills necessary to recognize and prevent dating violence. According to Sudermann & Jaffe (1993) the group’s goals should be centered around helping the students to recognize and avoid abusive relationships, learn effective communication skills, as well as to gain an understanding of both the long-term and short-term effects of being involved in an abusive relationship. People who should be asked to provide input into the members that should be in dating violence groups should include teachers, counselors, and administrators. Friends and family recommendations should also be considered, with special



consideration being given to individuals who have a family history of abuse.

Upon choosing the group members the facilitator must make sure that the members agree to be part of a group and are willing to participate and share their emotions or feelings with the group. The members should also be required to have parental/guardian permission to participate.

Although there has not been a lot of research looking at the differences in violence expressed by boys versus females, Christian & Tolman found that “the degree of violence and injuries sustained from female perpetration tends to be significantly less than for male perpetration and females perpetuate more violence out of self-defense than do males” (1998, p.187). Although groups need to be established to inform young female adults of how to deal with and avoid abusive relationships it is also important to educate young males on nonviolent methods for handling anger and how to behave respectfully in a dating relationship.

### *Parent Education*

The school is not the only facet to use to educate young people on healthy relationships. Education begins at home. Adults must set an example of what a healthy relationship is and how to work through issues without the use of violence. Guardians must empower the teenager and remind him or her that he or she has complete control over his or her actions and the power to walk away at any point in time. Guardians must also be on the look out for warning signs of abuse and not be afraid to “be the parent” and set limits for their child. In a

survey commissioned by the Empower Program, a Washington, D.C. based education organization that works with teens to prevent gender-based violence, it was reported that only “eight percent of parents know of anyone that has been physically struck by someone they were dating” (as cited in American Fitness, 2002, p.10). This statistic is less than half of the reported number of teenagers who have said they were involved in an abusive relationship. If the parents are concerned about their teen, they need to have a conversation with him or her to be certain. Although most parents believe that their teenagers would talk to them if they were involved in an abusive relationship, reports put out by American Fitness have shown that only “thirty-six percent of the teenagers surveyed said that they would turn to their parents” (2002, p10). The reasons that some teens might not report abuse to their parents may include the fear of not being believed or feeling ashamed that they are responsible.

### *Intervention*

In thirty-nine states, for abuse to be considered domestic violence the individuals must be spouses or live or have lived together. Because of this definition teens are denied protection under domestic violence laws. What this means is that teenagers who are involved or have been involved in abusive dating relationships do not have access to programs organized or funded by the state to help domestic violence victims. Some of the programs which teenagers do not have access to include shelters, legal and medical assistance, and counseling

(Suarez, 1999). Teenagers of dating violence can place assault charges, or get restraining orders, however often times these are just generic forms of protection that do not include all of the legal protections that domestic violence laws encompass. Anti-stalking laws are also in place for teenagers to use; however these also have limitations. A proposal has been put into place that suggests that intimate violence be worded so that it includes “persons of any age involved in a dating, courtship, or engagement relationship” (Suarez, 1999, p.459). This definition would help to give more legal help to teenagers involved in violent dating relationships. By including this clause in domestic violence laws not only will the abused teenager benefit, but society would also reap the benefits because the problem of dating violence as a whole would be addressed and the self-perpetuating cycle of generational violence could be diminished.

Once somebody finds that violence is the way to get what you want and feel powerful, it is hard to change unless you have some sense that there is something really wrong with it or you experience some sanctions like arrest...a lot of kids...said that getting caught made a difference (Levy, as cited in Suarez, 1999, p.460).

With an adjustment to the domestic violence laws the major issues that will help a teenager seek help are waving the filing fee, providing simplified forms, and allowing the court to appoint a guardian to the teenager if one is not available to them. The restraining orders under the domestic violence law also

make the abuser pay any medical fees, lost wages, or counseling fees needed by the abused. The abuser is also required to get batterer's counseling. If restraining orders are violated the domestic violence laws require immediate arrest. Because teenagers in the majority of states are not covered under this law many times the abused are disappointed with authority, and therefore may not seek out help in the future. Another reason to include teenagers under the regulations of domestic violence laws is that when police officials are called to the scene of an assault they are required to ensure the victim's safety, which includes staying at the scene, getting medical attention for the victim, taking the victim to a safe place or shelter, and advising them of their legal rights ( Suarez, 1999). If an officer is called to a scene and the assault is not defined as domestic violence the teenager may be denied this type of assistance.

### Conclusion

Issues, such as dating abuse at one time plagued predominately grown adults, however recent generations of teenagers are being faced with its dangers and negative effects. Support and help needs to be provided to this population through prevention, intervention and changes in an outdated law. Counselors, school faculty and the community need to be educated on the signs and procedures to take to help in dealing with this issue. Because there are so many early warning signs of an individual who fits the profile of a possible abuser and signs to look for in someone who would get involved in an abusive relationship,

counselors have a unique opportunity to intervene early on. Education is the primary force that can help to minimize dating violence among teenagers.

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